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SUBJECT: SETTING THE RIGHT COURSE: TRANSITION TEAM
CHAIRWOMAN LEE AND NSA-DESIGNATE KIM ON ROAD AHEAD

Classified By: Amb. Alexander Vershbow. Reasons 1.4 (b,d).

11. (SBU) Summary: On February 19, Transition Team Chairwoman Lee Kyung-sook and National Security Advisor-designate Kim Byung-kook met with the Ambassador to discuss preparations for the planned April U.S.-ROK summit, the Transition Team's performance, and the best way to kick off President-elect Lee's diplomacy toward the U.S. Regarding high expectations in Washington, Lee Kyung-sook and Kim assured the Ambassador that the Lee Myung-bak Administration would do its best to fulfill these expectations and said that the best way to do so was to prepare a highly successful first summit. Lee said she thought the Transition Team had done very well and hoped its work would help set the Administration on the right course. End Summary.

Transition Team Wrap-Up

12. (SBU) Over a cordial February 19 lunch, Transition Team Chairwoman Lee Kyung-sook told the Ambassador that there had been a lot of trial and error during the transition period because there was no official record of what had been done by previous teams. Future transition teams would fare much better, she said, because of the detailed, systematic documents the team had compiled about what they had done during the two-month transition. She lauded the team several times and boasted they did almost one year of work in the short period since the December 19 election. There had been some resistance from some ministries, she said, but overall they had worked well with the Transition Team. Some friction was to be expected since the team proposed to eliminate five ministries. In dealing with the ministries, the team had a motto of 4 C's: Care, Credibility, Cooperation, and Creativity. She thought they had lived up to the motto. The Transition Team also came up with the idea that President Lee should lead through service to the Korean people and make the Korean central government less authoritarian.

Great Expectations

13. (SBU) The Ambassador said that expectations were very high for the Lee Myung-bak government in the USG. Lee noted

that once the U.S. and ROK recognized that our governments shared the same value system, managing expectations and increasing trust would come naturally. The Ambassador agreed and noted the planned late April summit between President Lee Myung-bak and President Bush would be a forum to confirm these similar values and philosophy. The Ambassador said that, by the time President Lee arrives in the U.S., Korea should have agreed to open its market to U.S. beef in order to ensure a successful visit and a positive reception by the Congress, setting the stage for FTA ratification.

¶4. (SBU) NSA-designate Kim said that the U.S.-ROK alliance was the pillar of ROK diplomacy, and the key to strengthening the relationship was to have a very successful summit in April. The Ambassador agreed that a good summit could signal a move to a new era in U.S.-ROK relations based on trust and common values. Also, the ROK would become more important to the U.S. in regional and global diplomacy. Kim thought this was positive but that it should not come at the expense of the ROK's relationship with China. In this regard, he said he was considering an early visit to Beijing to reassure the Chinese.

North Korea

¶5. (C) Regarding North Korea, the Ambassador said that since the DPRK continued to stall and had not made a complete and correct declaration regarding its nuclear programs, we could be headed into a period of deadlock. Therefore, it was important to remain firm but not slam the door or break off contact with the DPRK. If there was a disagreement between the U.S. and the ROK over what tactics to use to deal with a recalcitrant North Korea, problems could arise, the

Ambassador explained.

¶6. (C) Kim said that reciprocity toward North Korea had been overemphasized in the campaign and in the MB Doctrine, an outline policy paper for then-candidate Lee written in March 2007. While reciprocity was an important goal, it was difficult to hold as the most important tenet when dealing with a rogue state. Instead, reciprocal actions should be sought through diplomacy, rather than being turned into a declaratory policy. The Ambassador agreed that reciprocity was perhaps better implemented on a macro rather than micro level.

Lee Myung-bak Personal Style

¶7. (SBU) Lee Kyung-sook said that President-elect Lee Myung-bak was very energetic, working his staff hard. Kim Byung-kook said that the previous week, Lee had chaired two meetings with the Blue House Senior staff that lasted until 11:00 p.m. Kim said Lee would call a meeting on an issue with all those concerned and then brainstorm, and would play the devil's advocate role in order to hear alternate views. Given Lee's intellectual curiosity, the policy meetings could often last 3-4 hours.

Comment

¶8. (C) Lee Kyoung-sook has led a very energetic transition team for two months, proposing sweeping changes ranging from scrapping five ministries to compulsory English education. It is now up to senior staff like Kim to carry out her, and President Lee's, vision. While Lee will now return to her position as president of SookMyung University (her fourth term as President runs through August), many expect her to play an important role throughout the administration -- either in the National Assembly, as a minister, or even as Prime Minister. Dr. Kim has his work cut out for him. While very knowledgeable in all things American -- Phillips

Academy, Harvard -- he lacks bureaucratic experience; he will have a steep learning curve. If he masters that and obtains the President's trust, he will be a key player in the Blue House.

VERSHBOW